

Class and gender relations within the context of media-oriented practices: theoretical underpinnings¹

Ana Carolina Damboriarena Escosteguy and Lírían Sifuentes

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present a theoretical discussion about the two main paths of the project “The visibility of disadvantaged women’s ordinary life within the mediascape” (CNPq/2010). They are: a) the connections between class and gender positions and b) the unique features of identity studies vis-à-vis studies on media reception and consumption. The interest in discussing these issues here lies in the fact that they are understood in many different ways and, as a consequence, the positions taken in this study should be clarified.

Regarding the first path, the aim is to realize the relative influence of each position – gender and class – as a means of analyzing forms of inequality. Regarding the second path, we assume that there are three different approaches – reception studies, consumption studies and identity studies – which have distinct objectives and, therefore, are distinct, although the methodological strategies can converge. Finally, we want to set this research in the field of studies of media practices, in an attempt to take the focus away from representation analysis, also from discrete relationships between subjects and the media involved in reception studies, as well as in media consumption studies.

Key words:

Social class, gender relationships, disadvantaged women, media practices.

1 Opening remarks

The purpose of the research project entitled “The visibility of disadvantaged women’s ordinary life within the mediascape” (CNPq/2010) is to investigate the visibility that women from disadvantaged social positions get through the spread of personal stories, testimonials and diaries within the mediascape. This study has two key focus. The first is related to personal narratives, looking at the values and representations they support.² The second deals with the changes caused in the social world by these mediatized narratives, understanding that the media has impacts on other social practices and spaces. In this context, we present theoretical notes on the connections between class and gender relationships and, later, on the specific features of identity studies in relation to media reception and consumption studies. The interest in discussing these issues here lies in the fact that they are understood in many different ways and, as a consequence, the positions taken within this research matter.

A certain conception of class and gender cross-cuts our research, serving as a foundation for both issues sketched above. This theoretical

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basis forms the first two parts of this paper. In the third part we intent to discuss reception and consumption studies, as well as identity studies, the later referring specifically to their development in media studies. Finally, we consider that our research is going to be connected with the perspective that theorizes media as practice.

2 Class positions: thinking of the disadvantaged

Firstly, we intent to follow the direction taken by Santos (2009, page 465), when he states that “social class should be taken as a relational notion.” Therefore, we should situate the underprivileged social positions within a more comprehensive social context, always taking into account the Brazilian social structure as a whole, even if we do so in a rather simplified way.

Generally speaking, we start from the principle that in the past decade Brazil experienced a process in which new segments of the Brazilian society entered the consumer market, a fact due, above all, to increased purchase power, government income distribution programs,

enhanced access to financial services and greater credit supply to low income individuals. In spite of all the optimism about the economy as shown by income levels and the consumption pattern, which would allow us to rank approximately 94.4 million Brazilians as belonging to the middle class (IPEA, 2009), the family histories, experiences in childhood (poverty, child labor, early pregnancy and marriage, etc), the set of predispositions that form the practical behavior of individuals, the world view transmitted by the parents – or by those who replace them – to their children show their origin and belonging to the bottom of the economic system.³ That is, even if many of these Brazilians have had experiences of varying degrees of economic success, they are still experiencing a social and cultural reality which, in terms of learning, values, own experiences, leisure habits, world view and, particularly, professional occupation (basically manual labor) can be defined as belonging to the scope of underprivileged social positions.

We understand that, following particularly the research and writings by Jessé Souza (2006, 2009), beyond a class position that is strictly

¹ Earlier version of this article was discussed and presented at 40 Seminário Brasileiro de Estudos Culturais e Educação/ 10 Seminário Internacional em Estudos Culturais e Educação, May/2011, Canoas (RS), Brasil.

² The development of this issue is focused on the concept of “mediatized personal narratives” (ESCOSTEGUY, 2011) and on the identification of patterns and common logics among the diversity of print or broadcast reports, a theme that was explored and presented by Escosteguy in her lecture entitled “The Media Visibility of Disadvantaged Social Classes within Brazilian Mediascape”, at Westminster University (<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/schools/media/camri/seminars>, accessed on 04/07/2011).

³ This issue was investigated in the research coordinated by Lúcia Helena Alves Müller, *A dimensão simbólica dos processos de inclusão financeira e oferta de crédito a grupos populares (The symbolic dimension of financial inclusion and credit supply to low income groups)*, funded by PUCRS (2009/2010) with the cooperation of Ana Carolina Escosteguy.

related to the economic inequality, the term “class” is a relatively dynamic system which is being continuously done and undone, both in large scale, by the logic of the capital, and through values and representations that constitute the affective and emotional life. Therefore, we are searching for a view that goes beyond the more traditional discussions on social class that are limited to income. As previously mentioned, we can see different instances of economic rise that are not necessarily followed by a break from values and ways of being that belong to the original class position.

Our interest here is to highlight the fact that social division has impacts on the life of individuals and, for this reason, they have distinct abilities to act and, therefore, different opportunities in life.⁴ The intention is to bring together in the definition of social class, the material sphere connected to financial organizations, and the cultural sphere, which is related to social and cultural practices, in other words, how individuals and social groups think or act in relation to marriage, work, religion, education, etc.⁵

By disadvantaged classes we mean, therefore, those made up by individuals who have no control over value-producing resources and who

occupy underprivileged positions in the labor market or who might even be excluded from it. The operationalization of these concepts in Santos (2009) is focused on the social division of labor which results in different disadvantaged positions within the social structure. In sum, the corresponding empirical categories are: manual workers (farm hands, workers doing maintenance in buildings and public places, workers in animal production, construction workers, workers in agriculture in general, workers doing loading and unloading, miscellaneous services workers), domestic workers (doing basic household chores), workers without a fixed workplace (mason, street vendor, construction foreman, painter, hygiene and beauty services workers, sewing machine operators), small farmers (growers with very small properties), including the unemployed. These are all occupations that do not require skilled training and for this reason they do not get social acknowledgement.

Although being “underprivileged” is related to income, considering that the above mentioned occupations are generally poorly paid and frequently the lack of professional training is a result of lack of financial means to access a more specialized education, we may consider that social class position is not merely an economic

⁴ In the terms used by Jessé Souza and Patrícia Mattos, individuals have different dispositional abilities. According to Mattos (2006, p. 190), “[...] by dispositional theories we should understand those theories that explain the actions taken by social actors based on the analysis of their past socializations”.

⁵ This does not mean that there is total homogeneity within any class status. On the contrary, even in the same class status there are some differences within it.

factor. In other words, we should think of a connection between the “economic and cultural capital”, with the later being a combination of inherited family and educational values, such as the “structural elements” of the “social hierarchy” of the whole modern society (Souza, 2009).

3 Gender relationships: thinking of feminine identities

The concept of gender is strongly related, on the one hand, to the notion of relationship, difference and plurality and, on the other hand, it tries to destabilize biological determinism, and also a notion of universality and essence. With this purpose, the discussion aims at introducing cultural and social elements in the debate on inequalities between masculinities and femininities. The intention here is not, however, to review the trajectory of the concept or list its numberless and various interpretative possibilities. We assume its meaning is related to a social construct, implying the existence of values, rules, postures, obligations and duties that express what it is like to be a man or a woman in a given culture or society.

Maybe we have to stress that gender is not comprised within the class category, “on the contrary, the awareness of the difference between these forms of solidarity should help us perceive the actual weight each of them have” (MATTOS, 2006, page 164). If, on the one hand, we know that Marxism did not highlight feminine matters per se, on the other hand

feminist studies, at first conducted mostly by middle-class white women failed, for example, to approach matters related to black women and women from low income classes. Stolke (2004) talks of a racial and class myopia among feminist scholars. Studies on ethnicity and social class became more prominent only in the past two decades, with the purpose of giving voice to those women who did not fit the models that used to represent gender studies: white, Western, middle-class women. This convergence between class and gender positions reflects a commitment to a reflection on history, which is full of different forms of oppression (SCOTT, 1986). Therefore, we think it is more pertinent to consider that the links of domination are “relational” in nature, both across social classes and men and women (MATTOS, 2006).

Just like among social classes, in gender relationships there would also be an unworthy “class”. Masculine would represent culture, superiority, mind, reasoning; feminine would be related to nature, to inferiority, to the body and to emotions (BOURDIEU, 2007). Considering that culture is organized around classification systems in which at least two opposed groups are identified – we and they -, this opposition brings to light the unworthiness of one of the parties, since there is no balance of power between the opposing elements (WOODWARD, 2000). In gender relationships, women are on the “weak” side of this opposition.

Scott (1986) resorts to Pierre Bourdieu's thinking – who examines gender relationships as the primary space where power is played - to advocate that biological differences and labor division in procreation and reproduction operate as the ultimate collective delusions. Based on “objective” references, gender differences frame social perceptions. “To the extent that these references establish distributions of power, gender becomes implicated in the conception and construction of power itself” (SCOTT, 1986, p. 1069). To put it differently, sexual/physical differences legitimize male dominance. Therefore, the author proposes a definition of gender in which she highlights two key aspects: “gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between sexes and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (SCOTT, 1986, p. 1067).

Reflecting upon the formation of gender identities, Scott furthermore stresses instability as one of its features. However, a clear-cut, illusory separation between men and women prevails in our society, creating a false image of fixed feminine and masculine identities.

But gender identification, although it always appears coherent and fixed, is, in fact,

highly unstable. Like words themselves, subjective identities are processes of

differentiation and distinction, requiring the suppression of ambiguities and

opposite elements in order to assure (and create the illusion of) coherence and

common understanding. [...] In addition, conscious ideas of masculine or feminine are not fixed, since they vary according to contextual usage. [...] This kind of interpretation makes the categories of “man” and “woman” problematic by suggesting that masculine and feminine are not inherent characteristics but subjective (or fictional) constructs. This interpretation also implies that the subject is in a constant process of construction (SCOTT, 1986, p. 1063-1064).

Consequently, our focus is on a non-essentialist thread that emphasizes the social construction of identities, as opposed to conceptions that understand them as a category that is inherent in and innate to groups and/or communities. The understanding is that identities are being permanently constructed, constantly changing, crossed by public discourses and practices and experiences of subjects who are embedded in a given historical context.

To Bourdieu (2007), the identity of a woman is formed from very early on, so that she can learn how to act and think as a woman. The learning gains in efficiency for being tacit and incessant. Additionally, since feminine and masculine identities are defined as being antagonistic, what is encouraged for men is continuously repressed for women: girls should sit with her legs closed CERTO, should not expose certain parts of their body, should be gentle, care about their looks and serve other people.

In a converging fashion, the way the roles of each gender are structured is so strong that it becomes “natural”. This becomes clear when

people talk about women and motherhood. By getting so involved in the raising of their children, particularly because they carry them in their womb for nine months and breast-feed them, women have historically had less mobility, because they needed to be longer time involved in performing these tasks. This demand resulted in a “natural” association between motherhood and house chores. Therefore, women’s involvement with children in early childhood is understandable, however, “jumping to the conclusion that domestic work is women’s ‘natural’ work is unreasonable. The ability to have children does not mean that women are born knowing how to iron and sew” (LAMAS apud MATA, 1996, p. 69).

Additionally, following the reflections by Franchetto, Cavalcanti and Heilborn (1981, p. 43), the question “what is to be a woman?” lacks definite answers, since this meaning is not universally given, but rather emerges from concrete contexts that are unique to every culture. According to Franchetto, Cavalcanti and Heilborn (1981, p. 32-33), this implies the “perception that there is no such a thing as the Woman, but rather women.”

Women, as social subjects who assert themselves, are not a homogenous and monolithic reality, they rather live, exist in the concreteness of the social and cultural differences that constitute them. The deep understanding of the statement by de Beauvoir (1980) that ‘one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman.’

Finally, we should stress the fact that the connection between the two theoretical contributions that have just been presented regarding class and gender positions contributes to consider as underprivileged women those who are identified as manual workers, regardless of their income, because this activity is poorly valued by society, and additionally it does not require any formal skills or knowledge that depend on specific education. Therefore, the empirical research that will be conducted in the future to identify the consequences of the media visibility of the haves-not on the ways of life of a certain social group will focus on personal stories of domestic workers, manicures, waxing professionals, seamstresses, cleaning workers, street vendors.

4 A place to investigate class and gender positions

This last section will approach the development of reception, consumption and identity studies from a communication point of view, considering the need to identify a field of study that can support and render our research feasible regarding basically the following question: what is the media visibility to the ordinary life of women from underprivileged social positions producing in terms of feminine identity in this same social class? This question, in turn, is linked to the idea that we live in a world that is saturated by the media at all levels of the social process and, as a consequence, these

communication processes result in changes in society, impacting other social practices and spaces, in the case at hand, the production of feminine identities.

Audience studies hold a privileged place in the development and theoretical coming of age of media studies. We refer particularly to those linked to cultural studies' tradition which became known as reception studies.⁶ Generally speaking, the purpose of these studies is to take a snapshot of interaction between social actors and the media. Early in the process, the focus should be clearly on identifying possible readings linked to a given "message", therefore having a text (for example, the selection of a television show) or, a little later, a genre (for example, soap opera) as a research topic.⁷

Considering that reception studies have been conducted through continuities and departures, we can highlight a shift from a direct connection with specific texts to an approach focused on understanding contextual determinations, in other words, to investigations of the multiple articulations of the media in everyday life, turning into studies of media consumption. If, on the one hand, this change in focus can be looked at as departure from the first approach, on the other hand, we can understand it as continuity, since it remains circumscribed to

what happens within the limits of this space - consumption.

When describing the Anglo-American development of audience studies, Gomes (2004, page 191) says that "the studies that are more characteristically part of this trend [media consumption] tend to relate cultural consumption with the social experience of the members of the public." The same author recognizes the existence of a second trend within media consumption studies, found in research concerning the pleasure derived from consuming certain media products. However, in our view, none of them actually is a total departure from reception studies, in other words, even if media consumption studies appear to be a reconfiguration of reception studies, getting away from an analysis more focused on the message/receptor relationship, they are still concerned with the role played by the media in a given time in the everyday life of consumers.

Ronsini (2010, p. 2) seems to share our view noting that, in spite of the division between Néstor García Canclini's consumption perspective and that of the social uses, connected to Martín-Barero, "the terms reception and consumption are frequently used interchangeably to indicate a set of social processes of appropriation of media products." However, the author makes an effort to

⁶ See ESCOSTEGUY, Ana Carolina & JACKS, Nilda. **Comunicação e Recepção**. São Paulo: Hacker Editores, 2005.

⁷ We consider that these two possibilities are still valid.

identify possible distinctions between both Latin American perspectives, highlighting that in the former

a) there is a plethora of texts, and not just one specific text to be deciphered;

b) there is no concern to theoretically consider the mediations that constitute the process of giving a meaning to the media or the empirical details that involve the knowledge of their role;

c) consumption is the interpretation the investigator makes of the practices carried out by the investigated individuals, i.e., of the routine use of the goods by those who enjoy them and, to a lesser degree, it is characterized by the dual hermeneutics of reception (RONSINI, 2010, p. 3).

In our view, even this effort to reveal a certain detachment between these approaches ultimately stresses a final convergence: the concern with the localized presence of the media in a given occasion which obviously implies a specific directionality – from the media to the subjects. Therefore, we conclude that reception studies, in the framework of the project at hand, can only contribute to identify the changes that take place between senders and receivers under the influence of certain media texts, assuming that such transforming logic acts in a given direction whose starting point is the media. The same applies to media consumption studies, although the later are, to a certain extent, more comprehensive, as already mentioned. According to Dover (2007),

audience studies have successfully looked at who is consuming what and, to some extent

why and with whom but have paid relatively little empirical attention to social processes beyond the moment of the textual encounter – even when the everyday context is considered.

Therefore, the attention and investigation focused on the encounters of receivers/consumers and the respective texts and/or media, although relevant and pertinent, do not answer questions on the consequences of the media for social practice as a whole, this being the direction of our second research question. For this reason, the discrete analyses of reception, and even those of consumption, although valuable, are not appropriate to support the analysis at hand.

Let us now specify cultural identity studies (national, regional, youth, gender, ethnic and others), understanding identity as a “set of those characteristics through which social groups define themselves as groups: [in other words], what they are. What they are, however, is inseparable from what they are not, from those characteristics that make them different from other groups”, considering “social conditions” (SILVA apud MEYER, 2000, p. 103). In these differentiation/identification processes, in other words, processes of identity production, the circulation of representations by different media and/or symbolic practices are fundamental. According to Dover (2007), a focus precisely on such media representations or, as the

author calls them “textual representations” is what currently defines identity studies linked to media studies.⁸

To some extent, this choice is warranted considering that, in the context of cultural studies, the contribution by Stuart Hall, who conceives identities as politically and culturally constructed, at given moments in history, has an indisputable repercussion. Although reference is made to the fact that they are historically conditioned and that events, people, relationships and structures have a material existence, the author stresses that “identity is always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation. It is always within the representation (HALL, 1991, p. 49). Thus the importance the discourse form gets in these studies.

As has already been pointed out here, part of our investigation is also focused on the analysis of a set of representations that produce an idea of underprivileged women in an attempt to situate them and produce a certain identity. However, we want to explore, together with the just mentioned strategy, the possibility to investigate the identities of disadvantaged women, focusing our attention on the ways these identities are locally constructed through practices. The study of such practices means that we have to look carefully at human action in a social

organization. It is about noticing that “actors are engaged in concrete projects, informed by culture, but also producing and reproducing it in practice”. In this approach, actors act, even if in an improvised way, following certain patterns, and “these patterns reflect not only the culture, but the situation of action in fields of power and competing interests” (CALHOUN; SENNET, 2007, p. 10). The focus on practices, particularly on those media-oriented, aims to take the analysis away from representations and the discrete relationships between actors and the media, involved both in reception and media consumption studies. Therefore, our research is committed to the challenge of building bridges between social organization, social action and production of meaning, without disregarding the specificity of the media in shaping behaviors and identities.

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⁸ As a way to illustrate this type of approach in our academic setting, we refer to the collection *Mídia e identidade gaúcha*, organized by Felippi and Necchi (2009) and the studies done by Angela Felippi (2006), Sandro Colfeirai (2009) and Lúcia Loner Coutinho (2010), available at <http://www3.pucrs.br/portal/page/portal/biblioteca/Capa/BCEPesquisa/BCETesesDiss>.

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As relações de classe e gênero no contexto de práticas orientadas pela mídia: apontamentos teóricos

Resumo:

O objetivo aqui é apresentar uma discussão teórica sobre dois eixos centrais do projeto *A visibilidade da vida ordinária de mulheres destituídas na mídia*: a) o entrecruzamento das categorias posição de classe e gênero e b) a singularidade dos estudos sobre identidade em relação aos estudos de recepção e de consumo midiático. O destaque dessas questões deve-se à sua diversidade de entendimentos em circulação e, conseqüentemente, o esclarecimento dos posicionamentos assumidos. Em relação ao primeiro eixo, pretende-se que a articulação entre classe e gênero colabore na percepção do peso relativo de cada um desses termos. Em relação ao segundo, parte-se do pressuposto que são três linhagens diferentes – estudos de recepção, de consumo e de identidade – que têm objetos distintos, portanto, conservam uma diferenciação entre si, embora as estratégias metodológicas possam ser convergentes. Por fim, afirma-se que a pesquisa almeja estar situada no campo dos estudos de práticas orientadas pela mídia, na tentativa de descentrar a análise tanto das representações, quanto das relações discretas entre os atores e a mídia, implicadas nos estudos de recepção, bem como nos de consumo midiático.

Palavras-chave:

Classe social. Relações de gênero. Mulheres destituídas. Práticas orientadas pela mídia.

Las relaciones de clase y género en el contexto de prácticas orientadas por los medios de comunicación: apuntes teóricos

Resumen:

El objetivo aquí es presentar una discusión teórica sobre dos pilares centrales del proyecto *La visibilidad de la vida cotidiana de las mujeres destituídas en los medios de comunicación* (CNPq/ 2010): a) la intersección de las categorías de posición de clase y género, y b) el carácter único de los estudios sobre identidad en relación con los estudios de recepción de los medios de comunicación y el consumo. La razón por la que estos temas se ponen de relieve dicen respecto a la diversidad de interpretaciones en circulación acerca de ellos y, por lo tanto, asume la aclaración de las posiciones. Respecto al primer objetivo, se pretende que la relación entre clase y género colabore en la percepción de la importancia relativa de cada uno de estos términos. En el segundo, partimos de la suposición de que hay tres líneas diferentes - los estudios de recepción, de consumo y de identidad - que tienen objetos distintos, por lo tanto, mantienen una distinción entre ellos, a pesar de las estrategias metodológicas puedan ser convergentes.

Palabras clave:

Relaciones de clase. Relaciones de género. Mujeres destituídas. Prácticas orientadas por la media.

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